

## Article

# Working Backwards, Moving Forwards: Ephemera and Diversity in Australian Stories of Indigenous Second World War Service

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**Abstract:** Over recent decades, historians, communities, and museum professionals have worked to share and understand stories of Indigenous Australian military service. This article posits that ephemera from the Australian War Memorial's National Collection offer a tangible way to engage with personal stories and enrich the narrative(s) of Indigenous service in the Second World War. While many experiences were shared by the thousands of men and women who enlisted and served during the war, surviving ephemera and the related personal stories reveal the cultural, linguistic, and experiential diversity of the individuals who served. Using five case studies from the Australian War Memorial's National Collection, this article explores the link between ephemera and stories of service and suggests that sharing these links with a wider audience can serve to broaden understandings of Indigenous service and sacrifice.

**Keywords:** Indigenous Australians; military; Australian War Memorial; ephemera; Second World War

## 1. Introduction

Like many soldiers far from their loved ones, Private Jack Wallace sent postcards home at Christmas. While serving with the 2/1 Australian Pioneer Battalion in the Middle East in 1941, Jack sent a cheerful souvenir postcard to his family at the Paradise East Station in Elsmore, New South Wales, wishing them “a merry Xmas and a happy new year” (AWM, P0107.011; NAA, NX18820, B883). The postcard featured a superimposed image of Jack amongst palm trees and a rising sun for victory. With a cheeky smile and army uniform—complete with instantly recognizable Australian slouch hat—Jack was presented as a stereotypical larrikin digger sending well wishes home from war (Figure 1) (AWM, P0107.001).

Postcards such as Jack's tell many stories. They reflect the ways in which those serving attempted to remain connected to their pre-war lives and relationships, particularly during significant anniversaries and holidays (Mayhew 2021; K. Hunter 2013; Roper 2009). They also illustrate the way in which photographs could facilitate emotional intimacy through the “immediacy of representation” (Lydon 2010, p. 245; Batchen 2004; Barthes 1980; Sontag 1977). But Jack's postcard also hints at another, more elusive story: that of Indigenous Australian wartime service.

Uncovering narratives of Indigenous military service often requires a process of “working backwards to get the collection moving forwards”: digging through records, archives, other objects, and oral histories (O'Connell, interview with author, 2023). Emerging alongside academic (Smith 2020; Cadzow and Jebb 2019; Grant and Bell 2018; Beaumont and Cadzow 2018; Riseman and Trembath 2016; Scarlett 2012; Hall 1997; Jackomos and Fowell 1993) and community interest that has been growing since the 1990s, museum professionals have increasingly worked to identify and represent stories of Indigenous Australian military service, drawing on and acquiring artwork, oral histories, personal records, and ephemera to do so.<sup>1</sup>

This article uses examples of ephemera from the Memorial's National Collection to demonstrate the role of these objects in recovering, recording, and recounting stories of



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Indigenous military service. The power of ephemera and similar objects to fill gaps in the official records and provide a glimpse into lived experiences and individual/family memories has been well documented (Foster 2019; Reichard 2012; Saunders and Cornish 2009). Ephemera can be particularly important for groups who are often otherwise absent from the official archival record (Reichard 2012; Saunders and Cornish 2009; Hoskins 1998).

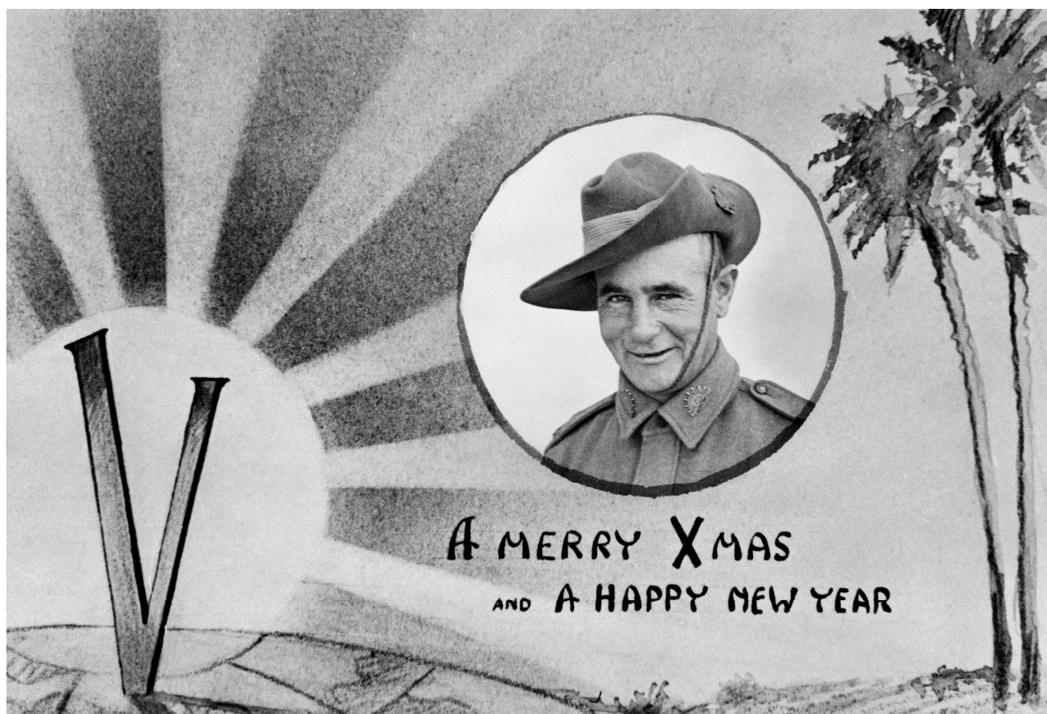


Figure 1. Christmas postcard from NX18820 Private Walter “Jack” Wallace”. Australian War Memorial.

In the context of a museum, ephemera can also sit alongside narratives of individual experiences to *people* the galleries, bringing a personal dimension into the museum space. As Kasia Tomasiewicz has argued, “such stories . . . can foster a personal connection between visitors, objects, museum narratives and spaces, reframing interactions in powerful ways” (Tomasiewicz 2021, 229). This peopling also diversifies public understandings of war, highlighting individual experiences rather than a singular anonymous narrative.

The Memorial’s National Collection holds a small but diverse selection of ephemera related to Indigenous service and experiences of war across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—including the signature of Dharug woman Marion Smith (the only known Aboriginal First World War nurse) (AWM: PUB01504) and boomerangs hand-carved by Guringay man and Rwanda veteran Bob Syron (AWM2022.1803.4.1; AWM2022.1803.4.3). This article focuses on five objects from the Second World War, a conflict that saw the highest rates of Indigenous Australian involvement.

This article argues that ephemera are an important, tangible way for museums to explore the individual wartime experiences of Indigenous peoples and acknowledge their cultural and linguistic diversity. While this diversity has been increasingly recognized in both the historiography of Indigenous service and the cultural sector, the best way to present individualized, heterogeneous narratives of service in a museum environment remains an evolving conversation. Rather than presenting an anonymous, generalized perspective of Indigenous war service—sometimes a (necessary) risk in broader histories or limited museum exhibits—these small items offer connections to individual stories, identifying Indigenous personnel, recovering their wartime experiences, and, more broadly, fostering connections between communities, museum staff, and visitors.

## 2. Indigenous Australian Military Service

Given the lack of information in official records regarding indigeneity, it is difficult to definitively ascertain the exact number of Indigenous Australians who served in the Second World War. Throughout this article, “Indigenous Australian” refers to Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as members of the Australian South Sea Islander community, Papuans, and New Guineans.<sup>2</sup> The Australian South Sea Islander population has been recognized as a distinct community since the 1990s and during the Second World War was largely governed by the Queensland *Aboriginals Protection Amendment Act 1934*.<sup>3</sup> Papua and part of New Guinea were considered Australian territories from 1914/1920 respectively until 1975 and were under the jurisdiction and governance of Australia (Grant 2014). Papuans and New Guineans are therefore often considered in Australian histories of Indigenous service during the Second World War (Grant 2014; Reed 1999; Newton 1996). This article continues this trend, while recognizing that the people of Papua and New Guinea likely did not consider themselves as belonging to the Australian nation and the tensions of Australia’s colonial involvement in the region (Underhill 2022).

Ongoing research conducted by the Memorial currently suggests that at least 4000 Indigenous men and women (excluding ancillary workers) served in the Second World War.<sup>4</sup> These 4000 men and women enlisted to fight in the Second World War despite legal restrictions intended to limit and control the movement, labor, and relationships of Indigenous peoples within Australia. Each mainland Australian state had introduced protection legislation from the 1860s to the early twentieth century, while the Australian Constitution (1901) delegated legal authority for Indigenous Australians to the states rather than the newly created federal government.

Indigenous Australians were also included in interpretations of the *Defence Act 1903* (Cth), although, as a group, they were not explicitly mentioned. The 1909 amendment to the *Defence Act* (Cth) included a clause exempting persons “who are not of substantial European origin or descent” from military training. In 1910, a further amendment specified that “persons who are not substantially of European origin or descent” were “exempt from service in times of war”. While this clause did not explicitly prohibit Indigenous men from enlisting in the Australian defense forces, it effectively served to justify their exclusion and discharge on the basis of race.

At the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the restrictions of the 1909 and 1910 amendments still remained in place, officially barring Indigenous involvement unless a medical officer was satisfied they were “substantially European”. Despite these obstacles, many Indigenous men and women successfully enlisted in the Second Australian Imperial Force (herein Second AIF), the Royal Australian Air Force (herein RAAF), the Royal Australian Navy (herein RAN), and the auxiliary services. After Japan’s entry into the war and Allied defeats in South-East Asia and the South-West Pacific in early 1942, restrictions around Indigenous enlistment in the Second AIF were relaxed by military authorities (Hall 1997). From 1942, the invasion of New Guinea brought Papuans and New Guineans into the war as the colony became a front line of the war in the Pacific (Grant and Bell 2018; Robinson 1981). The wartime experiences of Indigenous enlistees in the Australian forces varied significantly depending on which unit they were assigned to, where and when they served, and whether their Aboriginality was widely acknowledged. This was especially true for members of the dedicated, auxiliary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander units raised between 1941 and 1946 and members of the Papuan Infantry Battalion and New Guinea Infantry Battalions (known as the Pacific Island Regiment from 1944). While men and women serving in general units in the Second AIF, RAAF, RAN, and auxiliary units had an opportunity to escape some elements of racial prejudice and restriction, the members of Indigenous-specific units were often still exposed to racialized discourse and colonial assumptions and exploitation (Riseman 2012).

The following four case studies use ephemera from the Memorial’s collection to demonstrate the diversity of Indigenous involvement in the Second World War. They

highlight how material objects can be useful in evoking and disseminating these narratives of diversity and individual lived experience.

### 3. “All Prisoners of War Who Saw This Work Greatly Appreciated It”: Corporal Pat Sullivan

In January 1946, excitement buzzed around the Albion Park Showground in the Illawarra region of the New South Wales South Coast as the Albion Park Agricultural, Horticultural, and Industrial Show was held, to “great success”, for the first time since 1941 (*Kiama Reporter and Illawarra Journal*, 23 January 1946, 1). Among its reporting on the prize winners from the weekend, the local newspaper highlighted “an exhibition deserving of special mention” in the needlework section:

One by E.G. Sullivan, who executed the work whilst a prisoner of war at Changi Camp, Malaya. The articles were all designed by himself and worked in what spare time was allowed them by the Japanese on whatever materials were available. The cottons for the brightly coloured designs were given to him by a fellow prisoner. (*Kiama Reporter and Illwarra Journal*, 1946, 1)

Encouraged by his wife Emily, Aboriginal man Corporal Pat Sullivan displayed three pieces of embroidery created during his war service: a tablecloth bearing the rising sun badge of the Australian Army among an island scene (Figure 2, AWM, REL/03669), a cushion cover with scenes from Malaya (Figure 3, AWM, REL/03668), and a cotton cash bag with a map of Australia and the coat of arms (Figure 4, AWM, REL/03670). A notice accompanying the display informed visitors and judges:

these souvenirs went through the Burma-Thailand Railway now known for its tremendous amount of deaths and hardships. All prisoners of war who saw this work greatly appreciated it, and the owner of these articles feels sure that without their aid in helping to conceal them when the Jap[anese] made their searches, he would not be exhibiting them at our show today. (AWM, 3DRL/6768)



Figure 2. Embroidered tablecloth by NX55741 Corporal Pat Sullivan. Australian War Memorial.



Figure 3. Embroidered cushion cover by NX55741 Corporal Pat Sullivan. Australian War Memorial.



Figure 4. Embroidered map by NX55741 Corporal Pat Sullivan. Australian War Memorial.

Pat's collection—donated after his death—is one of the Memorial's largest collections relating to Indigenous service and "easily the biggest collection of an Aboriginal prisoner of war", according to Gomerioi man and curator Garth O'Connell (quoted in [C. Hunter 2020](#)). Along with the three pieces of embroidery, all still in remarkably good condition, the Memorial holds Pat's wartime sketchbook, a bible, and a selection of hand-illustrated postcards and envelopes (AWM, 3DRL/6768), a handmade bamboo needle holder (AWM, REL/03671), a metal trinket box (AWM, REL/03673.001), yellow plastic trench art rings (AWM, REL/03673.002), a handmade necklace (AWM, REL/03678.001), and photographs (AWM, REL/0367.002).

Between the fall of New Britain on 23 January 1942 and the fall of Java on 8 March 1942—a period of six weeks—more than 22,000 Australians were captured by the Imperial Japanese Army (herein IJA) and Imperial Japanese Navy (herein IJN). By liberation in August 1945, more than 8000 prisoners of the Japanese had died in captivity—one fifth of all Australian Second World War deaths.<sup>5</sup> In Australia, the experience of Australian prisoners of the Japanese, particularly the casualties and brutal conditions of the Burma–Thailand Railway and the Sandakan Death Marches, has come to dominate memories of Second World War captivity experience ([Beaumont et al. 2015](#); [Twomey 2007](#); [Silver 1998](#); [McCormack and Nelson 1993](#); [Nelson 1985](#)).

A baker by trade, 38-year-old Pat enlisted in the Second AIF in July 1940 and was assigned to the 2/18th Battalion, arriving in Malaya with the 8th Division in February 1941. He was one of 48 identified Indigenous soldiers ([Grant and O'Connell 2018](#)) to be captured during the fall of Singapore on 15 February 1942 and was imprisoned at Changi (NAA: NX5571, B883). Pat came from a family with a history of military service: three of his older brothers fought in the First World War (NAA, B2455, 8067987; NAA, B2455, 8094987; NAA, B2455, 8094920), and two other brothers also served in the Second World War (NAA, B883, NX30886; NAA, B833, VX17451). The eldest of the three, Jack, was killed in action in June 1945 on Japanese-occupied Hainan Island, having served in both World Wars (NAA, B883, VX30886).

During his time at Changi, Pat had already filled much of his sketchbook with poems and illustrations of his experiences fighting in Malaya. After being taught some basic stitches by a fellow prisoner, he created his three embroidery pieces to combat depression and anxiety while held prisoner in Changi ([Grant and Bell 2018](#)). They were created using available materials: curtains found in the evacuated married quarters of the Gordon Highlanders at Selarang Barracks, gifted embroidery cottons from a friend in the 2/9th Field Ambulance, and a makeshift bamboo holder to conceal his precious needles. The pieces melded patriotic images of home—the coat of arms, map, and flags—with images of Malaya and expressions of captivity. The embroidered cushion cover contained the words "A.I.F. PRISONER OF WAR CAMP CHANGI 1942" alongside a tiger and Malay farmer (AWM, REL03668), while the tablecloth featured coconut palms and a *sampon* (a small boat used for fishing) (AWM, REL03669).

The importance of these creative outputs to Pat and his fellow prisoners is apparent in their survival. Despite Japanese guards' attempts to confiscate the embroidery at Changi, officers and fellow prisoners helped to conceal the pieces (AWM, 3DRL/6768). In April 1943, Pat was transferred from Changi to work on the Burma–Thailand Railway as part of F Force. He brought his completed embroidery and sketchbook with him. As O'Connell (quoted in [C. Hunter 2020](#)) explained, "for several months there they worked for 18 h a day in atrocious conditions . . . It was an absolutely abhorrent place to be". Pat survived his experience on the Burma–Thailand Railway, returning to Changi in 1944 with his embroidery and sketchbook, where he continued to produce illustrations and trench art.

Pat's ephemera are particularly significant because they survived. As O'Connell (quoted in [C. Hunter 2020](#)) explained,

For a prisoner of war, you would normally get a medal group and a badge or something like that; you don't get photographs, postcards, Bibles, cartoons, poetry, needles, and complete embroideries . . . It's very unusual . . . It's remark-

able that they survived, and in such good condition . . . It really is a remarkable collection and I'm so glad it came here.

Pat's ephemera in the Memorial's collection act as "bookends of his time on the death railway", tangible examples of his tenacity, creativity, and longing for home (O'Connell, quoted in [C. Hunter 2020](#)). His experiences were not unique; the collection affirms the presence of Indigenous service personnel at the center of a broader narrative of the hardship, coping mechanisms, and survival of Second World War prisoners of war.

#### 4. "One Palestine Pound": Private Bill Enares

Private William (Bill) Diaho Enares was in the Middle East during the same period as Jack Wallace, who was introduced at the beginning of this article. Having enlisted at Rutherford Camp in New South Wales on 19 August 1941, William was stationed in the Middle East from November 1941 until the end of March 1942, when he was transferred to New Guinea and then Borneo with the 2/14 Australian Infantry Battalion (NAA, B883, NX43965).

While in the Middle East, Bill purchased a novelty postcard to send home to his family in New South Wales. Souvenir postcards (and souvenirs generally) were popular amongst troops. Objects from foreign lands visited by soldiers joined discarded shells and bullets, trench art, and other small items in the collections of soldiers, offering tangible connections to their experiences for themselves and their loved ones back home ([Saunders 2016](#); [Lloyd 1994](#)). These souvenirs reflected the ways in which soldiers often behaved as quasi-tourists alongside their military duties, visiting local sites and collecting evidence of their travels to otherwise inaccessible and exoticized lands ([Buchanan 2016](#); [Ziino 2006](#); [White 1987](#)).

For soldiers serving in the Middle East, Palestine Pounds were a popular souvenir. These postcards featured the design of the Palestinian pound, on which images of soldiers and their loved ones could be superimposed. They could be sent home or carried with the soldiers as they continued their service.

The Memorial acquired William's postcard in 2020—the fifth original Palestine Pound in the collection. It features a portrait of Bill in his uniform and a picture of his mother Emily (Figure 5, AWM2020.814.1). The driving factor behind its acquisition was Bill's South Sea Islander heritage. William Enares was born in Tweed Heads in December 1916. He was one of eleven children born to Emily May Enares (née Sendy/Santo), the daughter of a female child servant from Ambae Island in Vanuatu, and Moses Topay Enares, a man from Tanna Island in Vanuatu, who had been kidnapped and black-birded at the age of twelve ([Davis 2020](#); NAA, B883, NX43965).

Between 1847 and the early 1900s, around 60,000 Pacific Islanders were transported to Australia to provide indentured labor for the Queensland economy, a process known as "black-birding" as part of the Pacific slave labor trade ([Davis 2020](#); [Fallon 2015](#); [Banivanua-Mar 2007](#); [Bird 2005](#)).<sup>6</sup> The descendants of the Pacific Islanders who remained in Australia are known as Australian South Sea Islanders. Although not indigenous to Australia, the Commonwealth government recognized Australian South Sea Islanders as "a distinct cultural group" in 1994. This followed the findings of the 1993 United Nations Working Group on Indigenous and Minority Peoples, which viewed Australia's South Sea Islander population as an example of population transfer as a result of colonialism, and a 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report calling for the recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders ([Davis 2020](#); [Australian South Sea Islanders 2023](#)).

South Sea Islander labor was central to the development of Queensland's sugar, pastoral, and cotton industries, as well as maritime economies such as whaling, fishing, and pearling ([Davis 2020](#); [Reynolds 2003](#)). However, in the environment of xenophobia and labor tensions that defined much of the early period of Australian federation, Commonwealth legislation was introduced to restrict and control the arrival and presence of South Sea Islanders in Australia. The *Pacific Island Labourers Act 1901* (Cth) placed progressive limits on the immigration of Pacific Islanders—either freely or as indentured laborers—with no Pacific Islanders permitted to enter Australia from 31 March 1904. The Act gave

the Minister for External Affairs the power to order any “Pacific Island laborer found in Australia after [31 December 1906] to be deported from Australia”. Although petitioned against by the Australian South Sea Islander community, in August 1906, Prime Minister Alfred Deakin passed a statute authorizing an order of deportation for Pacific Islanders in Australia. This followed the case of *Robtelmes v Brennan* in the High Court of Australia, in which judges ruled that South Sea Islanders were “indisputably alien” and could therefore be forcibly deported under the aliens’ power in the Constitution (Prince 2018; Affeldt 2014).



**Figure 5.** Palestine Pound souvenir portrait, NX43965 Private William Enares. Australian War Memorial.

To avoid deportation under the *Pacific Island Labourers Act* (Cth), many South Sea Islanders moved from Queensland to northern New South Wales, establishing major settlements between Tweed Heads and Eungella (Davis 2020). In 1934, those South Sea Islanders who had remained in Queensland were included in the revised definition of “Aboriginal” in the state’s *Aboriginals Protection Amendment Act 1934* (Qld).

The experience of South Sea Islanders in the Australian armed forces is particularly elusive in histories of Indigenous service, partially due to the small size of the South Sea Islander population and the lack of clear contemporary differentiation between Indigenous groups. The only other items in the Memorial’s collection recognized as depicting or relating to South Sea Islander Second World War service are two photographs of Private Edward Mussing (AWM, P03897.002) and his sister Private Faith Bandler (née Mussing) (AWM, P03897.001), Faith’s oral history interview (AWM, 1986, S02772), and a photograph of Driver E.A. Bobongie (AWM, 056582).

Although Bill’s Palestine Pound postcard resembles the other postcards in the Memorial’s collection, it provides evidence of the resilience and survival of Australian South Sea Islanders and their willingness to fight for Australia, despite mistreatment at the hands of colonial, state, and federal authorities. Given the lack of visibility of South Sea Islanders in Australian history, particularly military history, the acquisition of Bill’s postcard represents a valuable connection between the Memorial and the Australian South Sea Islander community, one with the potential to diversify and complicate the narrative of Indigenous Second World War service.

##### 5. “Somewhere in New Guinea”: Maiogaru (Gimuleia) Taulebona

There is a small showcase in the middle of the floor of the Memorial’s Second World War galleries, next to a sign providing an overview of the spread of fighting to Papua in July 1942. Alongside artefacts recovered from the Japanese and photographs of Australian soldiers is a silver medallion bearing the Australian coat of arms in low relief (Figure 6). The object label explains, “The Loyal Service Medal was introduced in 1942 to reward

Papuans and New Guineans who rendered outstanding service to the Australian forces” (AWM, RELAWM20435.001). These medals were awarded to Papuan and New Guinean civilians—including members of the constabulary—between 1942 and 1945.

By the outbreak of war in the Pacific, the island of New Guinea (today part of Papua New Guinea) comprised three separate political administrative areas: Dutch New Guinea in the west, the Australian Mandated Territory of New Guinea (1920–1975) in the north-east, and the Australian Territory of Papua (1914–1975) in the south-east (Grant 2014). By April 1942, the Australian areas were under military administration under the joint Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit (ANGAU) (AWM, AWM54, 80/2/1). Once war reached the island, areas of New Guinea fell under Japanese control, while large numbers of Australian troops arrived to defend the last stretch of territory protecting the Australian mainland from Japan. Papuans and New Guineans were trapped in the Second World War.

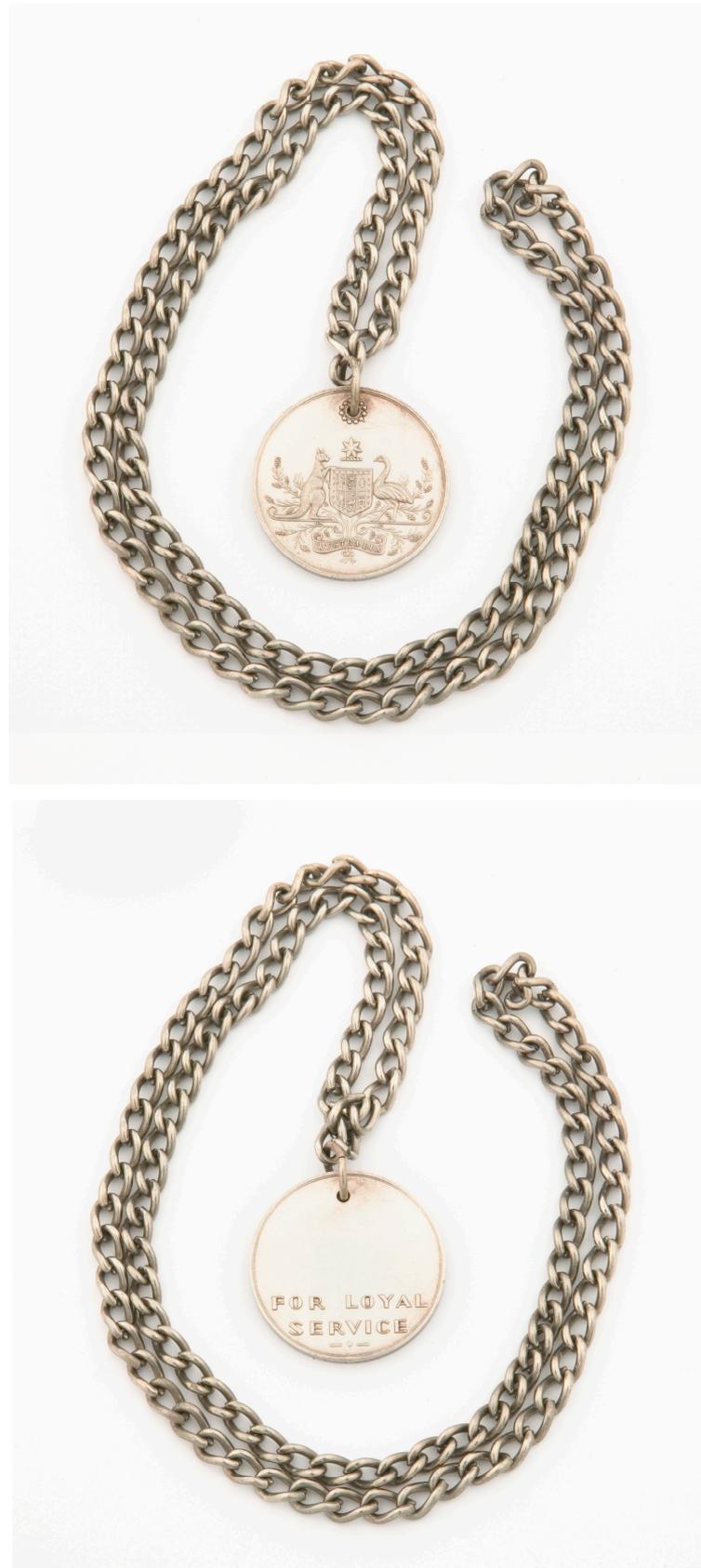
Despite their essential role in the Papuan and New Guinean campaigns—both as enlisted soldiers and as civilian ancillaries—many Australians still viewed ethnic Papuans and New Guineans as inherently inferior to white Australians, justifying their denigration and, at times, abuse (Riseman 2012). Although recognized and thanked for their service and contribution to the Australian war effort in Papua and New Guinea (especially on the Kokoda Trail), the prevailing impression was of an unnamed aide bravely serving a white colonial “masta” (Grant 2014; Reed 1999; Newton 1996). Deriving from a poetic appropriation of images of the Orokaivan people of Oro Province, the term “fuzzy wuzzy angel” became synonymous in Australia with the vision of the nameless “native primitive, innocent of involvement in the real war” (Reed 1999, 161).

Despite popular conceptions of the “fuzzy wuzzy angels” in Australia, the importance of maintaining the support of local Papuans and New Guineans was widely recognized by the Allied military; widespread propaganda campaigns aimed to convince locals of Allied strength and support, while military-produced guidebooks instructed soldiers on how to interact with “natives” to retain their goodwill and respect (Grant 2014; Riseman 2012; Allied Geographical Section, 1943).

Loyal Service Medals, produced from late 1942 and “specially designed to conform to [locals’] taste in decoration”, were just one part of a wide array of strategies (including coercion) to ensure Papuan and New Guinean support for the Australian war effort (*Daily Mirror*, 18 February 1943, 3). The medallions were presented by ANGAU officials at large ceremonies combining local custom and military tradition, intended to show the gratitude of the military as well as its strength and generosity to local communities.

One such ceremony, held at Ahioma, New Guinea, in April 1943, was captured on film by photographer Norman Brown. Major General Basil Moorehouse Morris, General Officer Commanding of ANGAU, presented Loyal Service Medals to New Guinean civilians Edward Guise, John Pilacapio, Pilimonomi, Ilai Dixon, and Banaba for their efforts during the Battle of Milne Bay, and one to 43-year-old Maiogaru (Gimuleia) Taulebona (see Figure 7, Brown 1943, AWM, 014649).

A mission-trained nurse before the war, Maiogaru was familiar with Australians and both Western and traditional medicine. Following the fall of Rabaul on 23 January 1942, her village fell within newly occupied Japanese territory. Villages within Japanese-controlled areas of New Guinea were expected to cooperate with the IJA and IJN, providing labor and food and revealing the locations of hiding Western civilians or military personnel (Grant 2014; Riseman 2012). Ramifications for disobeying the Japanese were severe: local *kempei-tai* agents conducted raids, beatings, and executions of those found to be assisting the Allied forces (Iwamoto n.d.).



**Figure 6.** Medal for Loyal Service, front and back. Australian War Memorial.



**Figure 7.** Norman Brown. Photograph of Loyal Service Medal presentation ceremony. Australian War Memorial.

At approximately 11.45 pm on 28 August 1942, an RAAF crash boat attempting to leave Milne Bay was spotted by a Japanese warship. The crash boat was hit with light-caliber shell fire, sinking almost immediately. Of the six crew onboard, two survived. Leading Aircraftman John Francis Fitzgerald Donegan was severely wounded, receiving shrapnel wounds to both legs and fracturing his right wrist. Though he escaped the wreckage, he was left floating across the bay unattended for 18 h before being rescued by a group of New Guineans from Devana village (NAA, A705, 163/103/239).

Despite the risk of concealing and aiding an Australian soldier, the group brought Donegan back to their village, where Maiogaru nursed him back to health. The villagers crossed Milne Bay in a canoe to inform members of the RAAF of Donegan's wounds, enabling his return to Gili Gili on 12 September 1942. He was evacuated to the Australian mainland two days later. This was the "outstanding service" for which Maiogaru received her Loyal Service Medal.

Before the official presentation, the RAAF men at Milne Bay organized an unofficial ceremony to thank Maiogaru for her role in Donegan's rescue and recovery. A note in Donegan's casualty report listed the items with which he wanted to reward Maiogaru: a bicycle, a rain coat, a pair of sunglasses, a box of aspirin, seven yards of red dress material, and a sweater. Immediately below the list, Flight Lieutenant E. Cavanagh wrote,

It is considered essential that these articles be provided in order that the natives will be encouraged to assist aircrews and any others needing assistance. It must be realised that had the Japanese become aware that the natives were hiding and tending an enemy they would have executed a number of the natives. (NAA, A705, 163/103/239)

This gift of material goods reflected the acknowledgement amongst defense personnel of the value of goods in New Guinean traditional society, as well as perhaps expressing an underlying paternalistic desire to be seen to be providing for loyal natives, given ongoing supply shortages. The importance of goods



and Riseman 2018). Although initially rejected by Australian military authorities due to the racial exclusion in the *Defence Act* and fears of Indigenous collaboration with the Japanese, a small number of segregated Indigenous units were formed during the Second World War.

The creation of these—typically auxiliary—units in part reflected the recognition among military officials of the value of Indigenous knowledge and skills, as well as an opportunity to retain the loyalty and service of communities seen to be “on the fringe” (Riseman 2012; Sheffield and Riseman 2018). Alongside Papuan and New Guinean battalions and ancillary labor units, a handful of Indigenous-specific units were formed across Northern Australia to assist in the defense of the sparsely populated region. The largest of these were the Northern Territory Special Reconnaissance Unit (NTSRU, 1942–1943), the Snake Bay Patrol (1942–1945), and the Torres Strait Light Infantry Battalion (TSLIB 1941–1946).<sup>7</sup> Military authorities intended these units—under the supervision of white officers—to combine traditional bushcraft and martial tactics with formal military training in a defensive role across Northern Queensland, the Northern Territory, and the Tiwi and Torres Strait Islands (Riseman 2012; Hall 1997).

With maximum strength of around 830 Torres Strait Islander men, the TSLIB was the largest Indigenous-specific unit raised during the war and the only Indigenous Australian battalion. The independent infantry company of 100 men formed in May 1941 was expanded in 1942 after Japan’s entry into the war and was officially established as a battalion under the command of Major Jock Swain in March 1943 (Hall 1991; Seekee 2000). Enlisted men received combat training and undertook manual labor, wireless operating, driving, signaling, and carpentry work (Osborne 1997). Between October and December 1943, a detachment carried out patrol operations in New Guinea, while Major Charles Godtschalk and a small number of men were based in Merauke in Papua for several months in 1944–1945 (AWM, 1991, S01542; AWM, AWM2018.6.28).

The final item of Indigenous ephemera discussed in this article—and perhaps one of the most significant in the Memorial’s collection—comes from this second period in Merauke. Godtschalk and his men spent Christmas in Merauke, engaging in the established tradition of having officers serve the men Christmas dinner, along with gift giving and dancing. Two days later, on 27 December 1944, Private Saulo Waia sat down to write a letter to Major Godtschalk’s wife, Doreen. Written in looping handwriting on paper from the Australian Comforts Fund, the letter began,

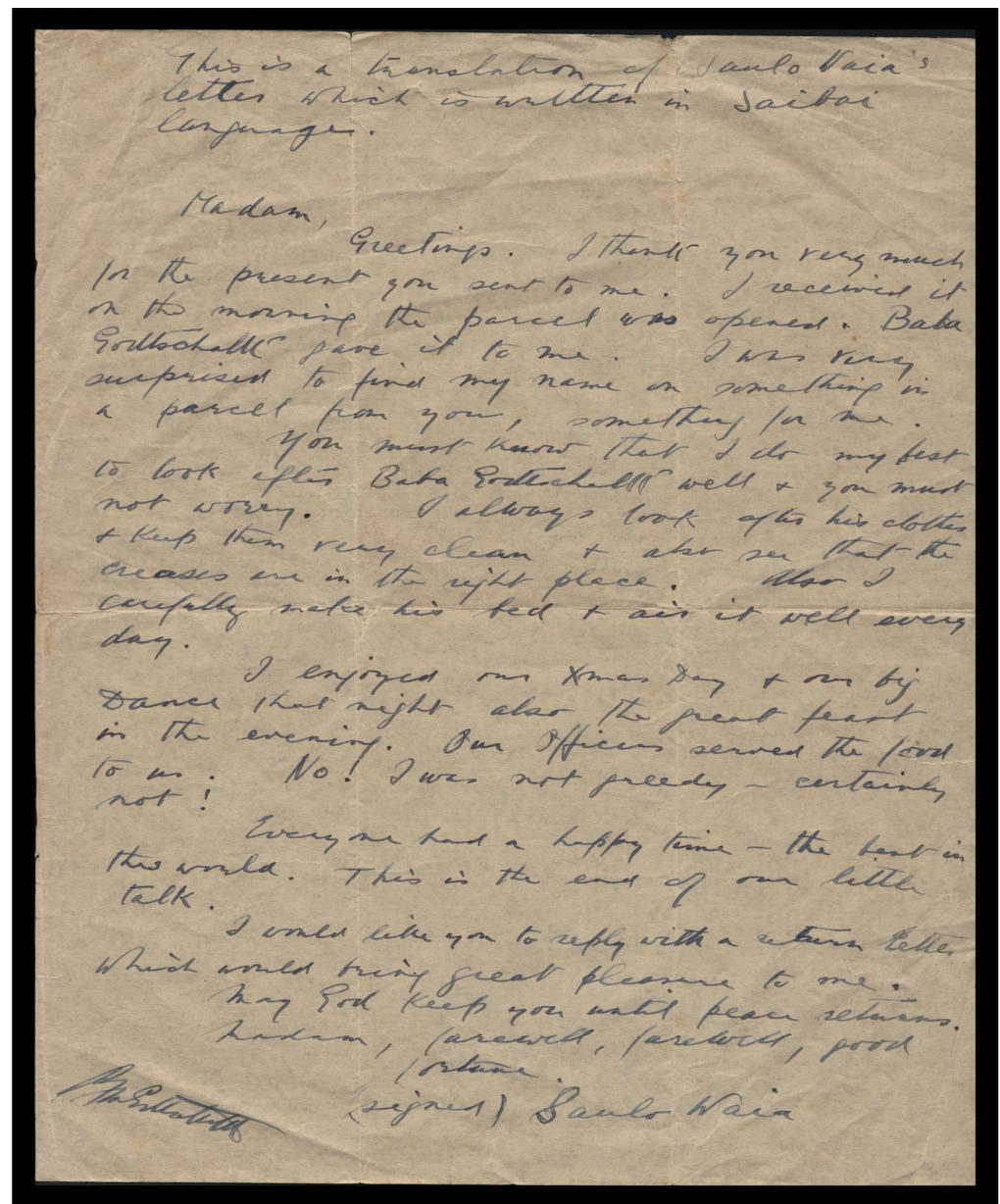
I thank you very much [for] the present you sent to me. I received it on the morning the parcel was opened. Baba Godtschalk gave it to me. I was very surprised to find my name on something in a parcel from you, something [for] me.

It is unclear if Doreen Godtschalk received the letter that Saulo wrote to her. She did, however, receive a copy of the letter in her husband’s handwriting, with a note at the top explaining, “this is a translation of Saulo Waia’s letter which is written in Saibai language”. (Figure 9, AWM, AWM2017.7.273)

Saibai is a large, low-lying island less than five kilometers off the coast of New Guinea, at the very north of the Torres Strait. Saulo Waia was born on the island in 1916. Before the war, he worked as a pearl diver and lugger (boatman), based on Waiben/Thursday Island (AWM, 1991, S01542). He joined the army in Cairns in September 1942, signing on with the TSLIB with his six brothers (NAA, B884, Q304649; AWM, AWM2018.6.28).

The question of how freely Torres Strait Islander men volunteered for the TSLIB remains contentious. Many testimonies from enlisted men describe aggressive recruiting practices that often mirrored previous colonial violence against their people (Osborne 1997; Sheffield and Riseman 2018). However, these tactics occurred alongside a genuine desire among many Torres Strait Islander men to serve and defend their homes. After March 1942, the threat of invasion was widely felt among the islands’ populations. As Saulo explained, “We joined in for the sake of our families. We don’t want to get killed . . . not prepared for anything . . . we got no guns in the islands” (AWM, 1991, S01542). The motivation to defend

their families and communities from potential invasion was strong; nearly all eligible men from the Torres Strait Islands enlisted in the TSLIB or as auxiliary workers (Seekee 2000).



**Figure 9.** Handwritten translation of letter from Q304649 Lance Corporal Saulo Waia. Australian War Memorial. The original Kalaw Kawaw Ya letter has not been included for cultural reasons.

Few objects from the men of the TSLIB survive in museum collections; most of the Memorial's items are photographs captured by Norman Stuckey on Waiben/Thursday Island (Stuckey, 1945, AWM, 119169; Stuckey, 1945, AWM, 119170; Stuckey, 1945, AWM, 119171) or relate to Major Charles Godtschalk (AWM, PR00866). Saulo's original letter and its translation were found by a Memorial curator in Godtschalk's private record in 2017 during research for the *For Country, For Nation* touring exhibition (Robertson 2017).

Saulo's letter in Kalaw Kawaw Ya, the language of Saibai, along with a contemporary translation were vital discoveries. There are few surviving letters written by Indigenous peoples about their wartime experiences in identified collections, and even fewer in traditional languages.<sup>8</sup> Given the widely recognized importance of traditional languages in connection to culture and wellbeing (Harvey 2021; McCarty 2021; Sivak et al. 2019;

Whalen et al. 2022), Saulo's letter provides a rare insight into the daily lives of men of the TSLIB and a tangible link to a significant aspect of Saibai culture and heritage.

The fact that Saulo's letter was translated into English by Godtschalk, the survival of the letter in his own papers, and Saulo's reference to his commander as "Baba" (the emotive form of father/dad) reflects some level of closeness (albeit paternal) between the two men, and between Godtschalk and his men more broadly. Godtschalk's other surviving papers suggest a sense of respect for the men of the TSLIB, describing them as "proud", "splendid seamen", unequalled craftsmen, and "precision itself" (AWM, PR00866).

Saulo ends his letter by reassuring Doreen that he was taking care of "Baba Godtschalk", that he hoped that he would receive a letter from her soon, and a final "farewell, farewell, good fortune" (AWM, AWM2017.7.273). Although seemingly unassuming, the letter offers valuable insight into the experiences of a member of the TSLIB and the ways in which race, authority, and culture overlapped during the battalion's operations.

## 7. Working Backwards, Moving Forwards

Returning to Jack Wallace's story from the beginning of the article, for decades, no one at the Memorial could positively identify him. The original caption for the negative of his postcard read, "Private Jack Wallace, an Aboriginal serviceman from the Second World War", but no "Jack Wallace" in the records matched his description and service. It was not until 2018 that O'Connell and Ngunnawal/Gomeroi man and Indigenous Liaison Officer Michael Bell connected Jack to his birth name, service record, and mob. Born William Walter Wallace in February 1905, Jack was a descendant of Aboriginal woman Julia Ngoorabl Marno and part of a large extended family. To date, 31 members of Jack's extended family are known to have served in the Australian Defence Forces, including three of his brothers, who served alongside Jack in the Second World War (NAA, A12372, R/2101/H; NAA, B833, NX25684; NAA, B833, NX24325).<sup>9</sup>

Jack's story, like those of Pat Sullivan, Bill Enares, Maiogaru Taulebona, and Saulo Waia, lives on in part through his ephemera. Sarafina Pagnotta describes museum collections as emerging from "the fear of forgetting . . . Within a collection, the object is given the potential to carry on the narrative of the experience at its origin" (Pagnotta 2020, 244). Through family stories and archival research, staff at the Memorial have been able to recover the histories of these individuals and their ephemera and share them with descendants, communities, and the wider public.

The stories contained in the Memorial's ephemera add depth to broader narratives of Indigenous service, offering individual, diverse experiences of warfare and indigeneity. While many experiences were undoubtedly shared by the thousands of men and women who enlisted and served during the war, the process of identifying surviving ephemera and recovering personal stories reveals the diversity of the individuals who served. In highlighting this diversity, along with the shared experiences of war, these individuals' stories contribute to a broader narrative of shared service, sacrifice, and pride. As Bell explained,

Researching the commitment and contribution of [Indigenous Australian] service people has revealed the depth and diversity of this service, just as their service is a reflection of the diversity of the ancient and modern societies from which these men and women came . . . The shared experience of war and the recognition of patriotism, loyalty, love, service and sacrifice can be a step towards greater reconciliation. (Bell and O'Connell 2022, v–vii)

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## Notes

- 1 A fully searchable database of identified Indigenous Australian soldiers is available on the AWM website: Last accessed 22 April 2024, <https://www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search/people?roll=Indigenous%20Service>.
- 2 Where known, specific language/clan/island groups are used when discussing individuals.
- 3 This categorization has since been viewed by many South Sea Islanders as a form of “cultural genocide” and erasure of their distinct cultural identity.
- 4 For a brief summary of Indigenous Second World War service, see “Indigenous service in Australia’s armed forces in peace and war”, [Indigenous Service in Australia’s Armed Forces in Peace and War \(2022\)](#).
- 5 Over 30,000 Australians became prisoners of war during the Second World War. See [Long \(1963, 633\)](#).
- 6 The question of whether this “black-birding” of peoples constitutes human trafficking remains contested, but many Australian South Sea Islanders consider their ancestors’ movement through the Pacific labor trade to be a form of slavery and/or indentured/coerced labor.
- 7 The NTSRU comprised 50–70 men, while the Snake Bay Patrol was made up of 36 men from Yermalner/Melville Island.
- 8 Exceptions to this include: AWM, PR01679; State Library NSW (SLNSW), 909095, 266; SLNSW, 422596. Godstchalk, Charles.
- 9 Family tree received from Indigenous Liaison Office via internal correspondence.

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